Lockout at the Journal de Montreal approaching 475th day

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On April 19, 253 employees of the *Journal de Montreal* marked the 450th day since they were locked out from their jobs by the French-language daily.

Owned by Quebecor Media Inc (QMI), one of Canada's largest media conglomerates, the *Journal de Montreal* is Quebec's second largest circulation newspaper.

QMI is seeking to extort sweeping concessions from the *Journal de Montreal* workers.

These include:

• the right to publish articles by journalists and columnists in all the conglomerate's publications, including its magazines, other daily newspapers and Internet sites, without paying additional compensation;

• the right to outsource all its operations;

• the elimination of 75 positions;

• an increase of 25 percent in the number of hours worked without any additional compensation;

• a 20 percent decrease in benefits;

• the abolition of current job descriptions and a management right to impose new tasks and pay scale changes without warning.

The conflict at the *Journal de Montreal* raises to 14 the number of lockouts imposed by Quebecor in the past 15 years.

The cuts the corporation is demanding will affect over 250 employees, including about 100 office workers (accountants, telephone salespeople, administrative assistants, receptionists) as well as copy editors, archivists and journalists.

During the current lockout, Quebecor has stated that its intention is not to revise the present union agreement, but rather to rewrite it from start to finish so that it embodies the company's "current business model."

Other Quebecor-owned newspapers have recently imposed drastic cuts in manpower and working conditions. For example, workers at the *Journal de Quebec* were locked out for 16 months between 2007 and 2008, resulting in their acceptance of a new collective agreement that contains numerous concessions, including an increase in the work week from 32 to 37.5 hours without any increase in compensation, which translates into a massive cut in their hourly pay.

The union at the *Journal de Quebec* accepted the concessions, claiming, "We had to make this compromise to preserve the four-day week." Since lifting the lockout, Quebecor has continued its offensive against the *Journal de Quebec* workers. As a result, workers filed 42 grievances in just 15 months.

On the advice of their union, workers at another QMI-owned paper, *Le Réveil* of Saguenay, Quebec, accepted a company "offer" under the threat of the paper's imminent closure. Under this agreement, QMI has reduced the number of workers from 23 to just five, three journalists and two office staff.

The *Journal de Montreal* lockout is part of a series of measures undertaken to radically restructure Quebecor so as to squeeze greatly increased profits from a reduced workforce.

QMI is owned and directed by Pierre-Karl Péladeau, one of the richest businessmen in Quebec. The conglomerate ended its 2009 fiscal year with revenues of $3.7 billion and net profits of $277.7 million, up from the $188 million in profits the company recorded the previous year. The increase in revenue is principally due to the operations of the cable distributor Videotron, which last year increased the number of its subscribers as well as its average monthly fee from $81.17 to $88.21.

The operations of QMI's news media division experienced a drop in net profits of $27.6 million. Company management has said that the profit decrease resulted from a decrease in income, but that this was partially offset by cost-cutting. "Restructuring and cost-reduction initiatives in the News Media division generated total savings of approximately $66 million in 2009," according to the company's annual report. The drop in operating costs was partly the result of "the decrease in manpower costs associated with the workplace conflict at the Journal de Montreal."

Quebecor is far from the only conglomerate in the media world to carry out major cuts in operating expenses. On September 3, 2009, the Montreal French-language newspaper *La presse* threatened its employees with the shutdown of the daily as of December 1, 2009, if they did not accept a $13 million cut in the company's payroll by the end of November.

La presse is a subsidiary of Power Corporation, the company of the ultra-rich Desmarais family. It justified its concession demands by stating that the banks were only ready to lend it the money needed to make up a deficit in the newspaper's retirement plan on condition that it reduced its costs by $26 million per year.

After three months of negotiations, the company and the various unions representing the *La presse* workers agreed on five-year concession-laden contracts. The new contracts impose an expanded five-day work week of 35 hours (as opposed to the previous 32-hour four-day work week) without any additional pay, and a wage freeze until 2012. Journalists also had to accept significant reductions to their pension plan. And finally, some 30 jobs were eliminated.

The unions have called the new concessions contracts a "victory" for the workers. The president of the union that represents the distribution workers at *La presse* showed the nature of the organization he leads when he declared: "We could not go any further than we did. We could not allow ourselves to begin a strike and embroil all the other employees and their families."

The union organizing workers at the *Journal de Montreal*, which is affiliated with the Confederation des syndicats nationaux (Confederation of national Trade Unions, CSN), has asked the population to boycott the newspaper. However the CSN itself has done next to nothing to popularize even this feeble boycott campaign. While workers have been waging a protracted battle with QMI, the CSN has left them completely isolated.

Instead of appealing to workers of other Quebecor-owned companies and to other sections of the working class to engage in militant actions to prevent the scab operation, the CSN is demanding that workers pressure politicians, most notably the anti-working class provincial Liberal government of Jean Charest, to intervene and pressure QMI boss

Pierre Peladeau to negotiate in "good faith."

Although the number of workers involved in the struggle at the *Journal de Montreal* is not large, it provides a window on the state of class relations in Quebec, exposing the true face of the bourgeoisie and the impotence and complicity of the trade union apparatus.

Both the *Journal de Montreal* and *La Presse* play an important ideological and political role in Quebec and in Canada. As large businesses, they exist to make a profit, but they also serve as propaganda tools for the ruling class, using their control over the information and editorial commentary they publish to mould and manipulate public opinion.

In recent years, both newspapers have been closely allied with *Les lucides* (the clear-eyed ones). Led by former Parti Québécois (PQ) and Liberal politicians, including ex-PQ Premier Lucien Bouchard, *Les lucides* have railed against *l'mmobilisme québécois* ("Quebec status-quoism"), the derisory name they have given to the popular consensus in favor of public and social services that benefit working people and lessen social inequality.

Quebec's corporate media greeted the Charest government's right-wing 2010 provincial budget with enthusiasm, with *La presse* dubbing it "historic." *La presse* was especially enthusiastic over the government's plan to introduce user fees for doctor and hospital visits, seeing this as an important step toward placing more of the costs of the health care system on the working class and as a measure that promotes privatization.

The *Journal de Montreal*, meanwhile, harshly criticized the budget from the right, saying that it did not go far enough in cutting social spending. Hypocritically, it denounced the budget's various regressive taxes, including a new health care tax that will be paid even by many of those with very low incomes, in order to stoke up an anti-tax movement—a movement it calculates can be harnessed to big business's drive to destroy public services.

The role played by these daily papers and the billionaires who own them shows how important it is that the struggle of *Journal de Montreal* workers become the spearhead of a working class counteroffensive.

But to accomplish this task, workers must break decisively with the trade union bureaucracy.

Since the 1970s, the Quebec trade unions have been partners in an institutionalized tripartite system of union-business-government collaboration that subordinates workers' interests to the profits of business and have politically harnessed the working class to the big business Parti Québécois (PQ). In the 1990s, the CSN and the other unions worked hand in glove with the PQ government of Lucien Bouchard and Bernard Landry to impose massive social spending cuts, including the elimination of tens of thousands of public sectors jobs, in the name of eliminating Quebec's annual budget deficit.

This is the special position—along with its privileges, notably the Solidarity Fund (a union-run mutual fund)—that the union bureaucracy fears losing if it opposes the assault on the *Journal de Montreal* workers. In addition, the union bureaucrats fear the radicalizing effect that a mobilization of the working class in support of the locked-out workers would have.

Workers at the *Journal de Montreal* are at a turning point. To break out of their isolation they must seize political and organizational leadership of their struggle from the trade union bureaucracy and unify their fight with the entire working class on the basis of a new political perspective: the development of an independent political movement of the working class aimed at bringing to power a workers' government committed to reorganizing the economy so as to make the satisfaction of social needs, not the profits of the minority of capitalists, the animating principle.